

JOURNAL

OF

THE ASIATIC SOCIETY.

No. 62.—February, 1837.

I.—*Singular narrative of the Armenian king ARSACES and his contemporary SAPOR, king of Persia; extracted from the Armenian chronicles. By JOHANNES AVDALL, Esq. M. A. S.*

ARSACES the second, son of TIRAN, wielded the sceptre of royalty in *Armenia* in the middle of the fourth century. He was contemporary with the Persian king SAPOR, surnamed the long-lived, with whom he closed a treaty of alliance, offensive and defensive. Both were descendants of the ARSACIDÆ, and thus stood related to each other by the ties of consanguinity. Distrustful of the sincerity of the friendship of ARSACES, SAPOR took the precaution of securing it by the obligation of a solemn oath. He feared a formidable enemy in the person of the emperor of *Greece*, and it was his policy to devise every means in his power to alienate from him the good-will of the king of *Armenia*. In vain ARSACES assured him of his continued attachment. SAPOR sent for the Armenian priests of the church of Ctesiphon, the head of whom was called MARI. ARSACES was induced to swear by the Gospel in their presence, to keep inviolate the profession of his alliance and friendship to the king of *Persia*.

ARSACES was a valiant, but fickle king. His bravery could only be equalled by the degree of perfidy he displayed in his intercourse with the people over whom he ruled, and with his avowed allies. Cruelty and treachery were the principal characteristics by which his acts were distinguished. For a while he continued firm in the observance

of his friendship towards SAPOR, of which he afforded him a proof by co-operating with him in an expedition against the emperor of *Greece*. But, by the intrigues of one of his courtiers called ANDOVK, the good feeling and affection that existed between the two potentates, were changed into the deadliest enmity and hatred. ARSACES waged war with SAPOR for thirty years, and fortune invariably crowned his operations with success. He owed many of his conquests to the skill, experience and intrepidity of the Armenian general VASAK, who, though of a diminutive size, on all occasions inspired the Armenian troops with courage, and created terror and dismay in the Persian ranks.

Flushed with success, and being naturally cruel, he ordered the principal Armenian satraps to be butchered in cold blood, and their estates and property confiscated. These and similar atrocities made him unpopular with his army, and estranged the hearts of the Armenian people from their monarch. Wearied by repeated hostilities, and harrassed by continued carnage, SAPOR addressed friendly letters to ARSACES, inviting him to go to *Persia*, and expressing his readiness to conclude peace with him. ARSACES, however reluctant to desist from the continuance of war, was induced to accept his offer, and, in signifying his acquiescence, sent him suitable presents. But, SAPOR far from wishing to renew his friendship, endeavoured to decoy ARSACES and to annihilate the kingdom of *Armenia*. FAUSTUS of *Byzantium*, who wrote a history of *Armenia* extending to the close of the fourth century, narrates a singularly romantic story about the visit of ARSACES to the Persian king, and his subsequent adventures in *Persia*. The work of this historian was first published in *Constantinople* in the year 1730, and latterly by the Mechitharistic Society of *Venice* in 1832. I shall here give a translation of the narrative.

“Then SAPOR, king of *Persia*, sent another deputation to ARSACES, king of *Armenia*, expressing a desire to effect a reconciliation. ‘If,’ said he, ‘we are willing to be hereafter on terms of peace with each other, this wish can only be realised by a visit to me on your part. I shall be to you as a father, and you as a son to me. Should you, however, be unwilling to accept of my proposal, then I must conclude that you are still inimically disposed towards me.’ ARSACES was apprehensive of visiting the king of *Persia*, without demanding the obligation of a solemn oath from him, Hereupon, SAPOR ordered a little salt to be brought to him, and according to the practice prevalent in *Persia*, sealed it with a ring bearing the impress of a wild boar, and sent it to ARSACES. He also intimated, that in case the

king of *Armenia* disbelieved his oath by refusing to accede to his wishes, then that refusal would be considered as a signal for the commencement of hostilities.

“By the intreaties of the Armenian people, **ARSACES** was induced to acquiesce, and *nolens volens* resolved to pay a visit to **SAPOR**. Accompanied by his faithful general **VASAK**, he proceeded to *Persia*, and was conducted into the royal palace. **SAPOR** no sooner saw them, than he ordered them to be placed under guards and treated as prisoners. He spoke to the Armenian king with contempt, and looked upon him as a slave. **ARSACES** expressed his regret for the past, and stood as a guilty man before him, who directed him to be kept under the strictest surveillance.

“Then **SAPOR** sent for astrologers and magicians, and communicated with them about his royal prisoner. ‘I have,’ said he, ‘on several occasions manifested affection towards **ARSACES**, king of *Armenia*, but he has returned my kindness with ingratitude and contempt. I have entered into a treaty of peace with him, which he swore to keep inviolate by that sacred volume of the Christian religion, which they call the Gospel. He violated that oath. I had contemplated to be uniformly kind and friendly to him, but he abused the confidence of my friendship. I ordered the Armenian priests of *Ctesiphon* to be summoned to my presence, from a supposition that they had deceitfully administered an oath to **ARSACES**, and afterwards instigated him to a violation of that oath. I considered them guilty of a heinous crime, but was assured by the high priest called **MARI**, of their having performed the task of adjuration in a just and becoming manner. It was also mentioned, that if the Armenian king acted contrary to that solemn obligation, the Gospel, by which he had sworn, would drag him to my feet. I could not, however, persuade myself to believe what **MARI** and his colleagues asserted. I ordered seventy of them to be slaughtered in one pit, and put their followers to the sword. The Gospel, by which **ARSACES** had sworn, and which is the fundamental rule of the Christian religion, I desired to be tied with chains and kept in my treasury. But, now I call to recollection the assertion of **MARI**, who intreated me to spare their lives, and assured me that the very Gospel would bring the perjurer to my feet. The prediction of that priest has been fully verified. It is now upwards of thirty years that **ARSACES** unceasingly waged war with the Persians, and on all occasions proved victorious. Now, he has surrendered himself to us of his own accord! Could I assure myself of his friendship and allegiance in future, I should allow him to depart in peace to *Armenia*, loaded with honors and valuable presents.’

“The astrologers and magicians required time for the consideration of the question proposed to them by SAPOR. On the following day they assembled at the royal palace and said, ‘Since the Armenian king ARSACES has come to you of his own accord, we desire to know how he speaks to you, how he behaves in your presence, and what does he think of himself?’ SAPOR replied, ‘He considers himself as one of my servants, and lies prostrate in the dust at my feet.’ The astrologers and magicians advised him how to act. ‘Do what we say,’ replied they: ‘keep ARSACES and his general here in confinement, and send messengers to *Armenia*, with instructions to bring from that country two loads of earth and a large pitcher of water. Get the half of the floor of the royal pavilion strewed with the earth of *Armenia*, and holding the Armenian king by the hand, walk over that part of the ground covered with the earth of *Persia*, and confer with him on a subject. After which, tread with him over the earth brought from *Armenia*, and put him some questions. Thus you will be enabled to ascertain from his address and replies whether he will continue firm in his allegiance and friendship to you, after your allowing him to depart to *Armenia*. Should he, however, assume an overbearing attitude while treading on the Armenian earth, then be assured of the renewal of his hatred and enmity towards you, and of the commencement of fresh hostilities immediately after his return to his native soil.’

“The king of *Persia* adopted the suggestions of the astrologers and magicians. He despatched messengers to *Armenia* with dromedaries, for the purpose of bringing a quantity of earth and water from that country, and trying therewith the proposed experiment. In course of a few days the orders of SAPOR were put into execution. He then ordered the half of the floor of his royal pavilion to be strewed with the earth, and sprinkled with the water brought from *Armenia*, and the other half to be covered with the earth of *Persia*. He desired ARSACES, king of *Armenia*, to be brought before him apart from other individuals, and began to walk with him hand in hand. While going to and fro over the Persian earth, SAPOR asks, ‘why did you become my enemy, ARSACES, king of *Armenia*? I have looked upon you as my son, and contemplated to form an alliance with you by effecting a marriage between you and my daughter, and thus to take you into my adoption. But you have armed yourself against me, and of your own free will treated me as a foe, by waging war with the Persians for upwards of thirty years.’

“ARSACES replied, ‘I have transgressed the law of friendship, and must confess my fault. It was I that routed your enemies, and put

them to flight, in the hope of being honored by you with rewards. But those, who had plotted my ruin, endeavoured to estrange my heart from you, and to create dissensions between us. The oath, administered to me by MARI, has conducted me to your presence, and here I stand before you! I am your servant, professing submission to you. Treat me as you choose, or kill me. I am a guilty man, and your despicable slave.'

"SAPOR the king holding him by the hand, received his justification, and conducted him to that part of the ground covered with the Armenian earth. No sooner had they began to walk there, than ARSACES changed the tone of his voice, and had recourse to vehement and insolent language. 'Thou wicked slave,' said ARSACES, 'stand aloof from me! Thou hast usurped the throne of thy lords and masters! I must punish you for the wrongs you have done to my ancestors, and the death of the king ARTEVAN* must be revenged on you! Thou hast robbed me of my crown and country, but these must be restored to me, and your audacity shall not be allowed to remain unpunished!'

"The king of *Persia* hearing this, began to walk again with ARSACES on the Persian earth. The Armenian king then renewed the profession of his submission, expressed his regret for what he had said, and, on his knees, retracted all his expressions. But when he was conducted again to the Armenian earth, he became more insolent than before; and on his returning to the Persian earth, he repented of his temerity. From morning to evening many similar experiments were tried by SAPOR, the result whereof appeared only to be a manifestation of alternate feelings of insolence and repentance in the conduct of ARSACES.

"Evening came on, and the hour fixed for supper approached. It was usual with the king of *Persia* to entertain ARSACES on a sofa, placed next to his own throne. But on the present occasion the customary rule was not adhered to. Precedence was given to the other royal guests residing within the court of *Persia*. ARSACES was allowed to occupy the last seat, on the Armenian earth. He preserved silence for a while, burning with indignation and a desire of revenge. At last he stood on his legs and addressed SAPOR thus: 'The throne on which thou sittest belongs to me. Abandon that seat instantly. My nation have a just claim to it. Should you, however, persist in your injustice, you may be sure of meeting with

* ARTEVAN was a king of *Persia*, whom ARDASHIR the Sasanian put to death, and usurped his throne.—*Vide Whiston's Latin translation of the history of Moses Khorenensis, Book II. Chap. lxx.*

a merited retribution from my hands immediately after my return to *Armenia*.

“Hereupon, SAPOR ordered ARSACES to be put in chains, and driven to the castle of oblivion in *Khujistan*. Here he directed him to be kept in strict and perpetual confinement until his death. On the following day he summoned to his presence VASAK MAMICONIAN, the famous Armenian general, and heaped on him torrents of abuse. He took advantage of his diminutive size, and addressed him in a contemptuous manner. ‘Thou little fox,’ said he, ‘remember that it was you that devastated our country for the last thirty years, by putting innumerable Persians to the sword! I will make you die the death of a fox!’ To which VASAK replied, ‘However diminutive I may appear in your eye, I am sure you have not as yet had a personal experience of my mighty arms. I have hitherto acted as a lion, though now you call me by the contemptible appellation of a fox! But, while I was VASAK, I was like a giant. I fixed my right foot on one mountain, and my left on another. The right mountain was levelled to the ground by the pressure of my right foot, and the left mountain sunk under the weight of my left.’ SAPOR desired to know who were personified by these two mountains, that were represented to tremble under the power of the Armenian general. ‘One of these mountains,’ replied VASAK, ‘signifies the king of *Persia*, and the other the emperor of *Greece*. As long as we were not forsaken by the Almighty I held both the potentates in awe and subjection. While we obeyed the laws of the Gospel and followed the paternal advice of our spiritual head, NIERSES the Great*, we knew how to dictate and counsel you. But God has withheld from us the favor of his protection, and we are plunged into the pit with open eyes. I am now in your hands. Treat me as you choose.’ Hereupon the king of *Persia* ordered the Armenian general VASAK to be cruelly butchered, his skin to be flayed and filled with hay, and carried to the castle of oblivion, where the king ARSACES was imprisoned.”

Here ends this singularly romantic narrative of FAUSTUS. The castle of oblivion, it must be remembered, was a place of solitary confinement in *Khujistan*, intended for prisoners of rank and distinc-

* Մեծն Ներսէս NIERSES the Great was one of the pontiffs of *Armenia*, and great-grandson of St. GREGORY the Illuminator. He built upwards of two thousand convents, monasteries and hospitals in *Armenia*, and was consequently called by the appellation of the Հիօղ Architect. He was poisoned by PAF, the son and successor of ARSACES, and was buried in the village of *Thiln*.

tion. The wretched inmates of this dreary habitation were by the law of the land considered politically dead. Even the bare mention of their names was strictly prohibited, under the pain of a similarly rigorous imprisonment. SAPOR owed a debt of gratitude to the faithful steward of ARSACES, called DIRASTAMATN, who had once saved the life of the former from imminent danger in the din and confusion of a battle. "I am willing," said the Persian king, "to make you a recompense for your disinterested services to me. You are, therefore, at liberty to ask any reward you choose, and your request shall be readily granted." DIRASTAMATN expressed his burning desire once to see his royal master. "I have no other wish," said he, "save that of being permitted to visit ARSACES, and to spend a day of merriment with him, released from his chains." SAPOR was unwilling to yield to the wishes of his benefactor, but in consideration of his strong claim on his generosity, allowed him to proceed to the castle of oblivion, under the escort of a trusty guard, and bearing with him a royal mandate sealed with the signet of the court of *Persia*.

DIRASTAMATN, on his arrival in the castle of oblivion, burst into tears and fell at the feet of ARSACES. He untied the chains of his royal master, washed his head, cleaned and anointed his body with odoriferous oil, invested him with costly robes, seated him on a throne, placed before him rare delicacies, and standing near him on his legs, acted the part of a cup-bearer. Affected by an immoderate use of wine, the king of *Armenia* gave vent to his inward grief, and began to groan from the pangs of his heart, by contrasting his former grandeur and happiness with his present servitude and misery. The knife, placed on the cloth, he thrust into his breast, and thus ended his miserable life in despair. DIRASTAMATN seeing this, dislodged the fatal weapon from the breast of ARSACES, and therewith put an end to his own existence.

This narrative of the condemnation and subsequent banishment of ARSACES, by the machinations of magicians and astrologers, is fully noticed by PROCOPIUS, in the fifth chapter of the first book of his history relative to the Persian war, probably borrowed from the historical work of FAUSTUS, extant in the Armenian language. But PHOTIUS, the celebrated Greek Patriarch, who wrote an abridgment of the history of PROCOPIUS, considered this story as a mere piece of romance or fable, and as such it will be viewed by the learned of the present age.
